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ABSTRACT

Academic discourse, which takes its definitive characteristics from the papers written by professors to those in a particular discipline for the purpose of solving problems or furthering knowledge, is sustained by disciplinary rhetorical exigencies that prompt, shape, and convene an audience for such writing. The phrase "rhetorical exigency" was first used by Lloyd Bitzer in his essay "The Rhetorical Situation," but he defined it too narrowly to account for academic discourse. Bitzer's effort to limit rhetorical discourse and distinguish it from other types requires an "exigency" of such objective and intrinsic power that its practical, classroom use as a theoretical concept is severely compromised: his examples are all crisis situations, such as the bombing of Pearl Harbor or the fall of Nikita Khrushchev. He also addresses a second exigency experienced by rhetoricians in speech communication: the need to establish a perspective for rhetorical criticism as distinct from other types, notably literary criticism. Rhetorical exigency as applied to freshman composition is problematic, but perhaps the need for doubt (about conventional wisdom, for example) is one instance of master exigency that could introduce writing students to membership in the academic community. (NKA)

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CS 210 372

Lloyd Bitzer's "Rhetorical Situation" and the "Exigencies" of Academic Discourse

Arthur E. Walzer

Both sides in what Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford characterize as a "debate" (156) between those holding opposing views of "audience" can make some claim to victory. Those who view the writer's "audience" as a reader or readers with apriori needs and prejudices that a writer must accommodate can point to the power of this view as a heuristic and basis for rhetorical choice in technical and business writing courses where reports, letters, and memoranda are the staple. On the other side, those who view the audience as a pliant actor willing to play the role suggested in the rhetor's script can show how this view better accounts for much writing found in magazine and journal articles and the term papers that are the staple of many general composition courses. Two models or more make sense, and it may well have been this realization that prompted Douglas Park in the December issue of *CCC* to direct us away from thinking about "audience" in itself and toward thinking about audience as inextricable from the rhetorical situation. As Park says, "audience . . . means a group of people engaged in a rhetorical situation. Therefore if we are to identify an audience and say anything useful about it, we will have to speak in terms of the situation that brings it into being and gives it identity" (480). This view suggests that we should look to the typical rhetorical situation that sustains a particular type of discourse to define the audience for that discourse.

My concern is with what is sometimes called "academic discourse," discourse that takes its definitive characteristics from the papers written by professors, to those in a particular discipline, for the purpose of solving problems or furthering knowledge (or careers) and student imitations of same in term papers. My argument is that such discourse is sustained by disciplinary rhetorical exigencies that prompt it, shape it, and convene an audience for it, and that in teaching the writing of this type of discourse, it makes sense to talk more about rhetorical situations generally and "exigencies" particularly and especially than about "audience" as such.

Certainly mention of the "rhetorical exigency" brings to mind Lloyd Bitzer, who can claim patent rights to the phrase on the basis of his articulation of it in his essay, "The Rhetorical Situation" (1968). Although for the most part neglected by scholars in composition, Bitzer's essay has gained considerable prominence in speech communication, where it has been both widely influential and controversial, its importance due only in part to its position as the lead article in the inaugural issue of *Philosophy and Rhetoric*.[1] Despite its prominence (or perhaps because of it) Bitzer's essay has taken something of a pounding from theorists in speech communication, who often fail to acknowledge the debt we owe Bitzer for bringing into dramatic focus the concept of the "rhetorical situation" and the "rhetorical exigency." That praised registered, I will join the ranks of the parasites and pounders to argue that Bitzer defines the rhetorical exigency in terms too narrow to account for much discourse, including most notably academic discourse, and to offer my own version of Bitzer's concept of the "rhetorical exigency," a version that can, I maintain, account for academic discourse and serve as the basis for a heuristic useful to the student writer.

Since the intentions of Bitzer's essay have not always been understood, it makes sense to

begin with them. I take the intentions of Bitzer s essay to be similar to those of Donald C. Bryant s important, "Rhetoric: Its Function and Scope" (1953); indeed, the title of Bryant's essay is more indicative of the intentions of Bitzer's than Bitzer's title is. Bitzer's essay is an effort to delimit rhetorical discourse, to distinguish genuine rhetorical discourse from other types (Bitzer mentions poetic, scientific, and philosophical in passing). This goal, in itself, must seem odd to teachers and theorists in composition in 1987, who are more likely to view all non-fiction discourse as rhetorical discourse or at least as having a rhetorical dimension, with the difference between overtly persuasive discourse, such as a politician's speech, and that which self-consciously affects a non-persuasive stance, such as scientist s report of an experiment, to be a difference of degree only. But Bitzer claims that to qualify as "rhetorical discourse" what is said or written must be written in response to a particular type of situation, which he calls a "rhetorical situation." Other theories might attempt to distinguish rhetorical discourse (if they did at all) in terms of the particular effects of the discourse or by the presence of some specified formal features. But Bitzer wants to locate the distinction in the type of situation that prompts it and by the relationship of the discourse to that situation.

For Bitzer, then, the presence of a "rhetorical situation" is a precondition of rhetorical discourse. This means that what Bizer calls the "constituents" of the presumably unique rhetorical situation must be present if discourse that qualifies as "rhetorical" is to come into being. One of these "constituents" is the "rhetorical audience," which Bitzer writes, is not "a body of mere hearers or readers," but rather "those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change" (253). That is, for discourse to be genuinely rhetorical requires a rhetorical audience and for an audience to be a true, rhetorical one requires that those who comprise it have at least potentially the interest and ability to mediate the change that the rhetor calls for. That "change" is itself prompted by the "rhetorical exigency," which is the dominant aspect of a rhetorical situation. Bitzer defines the rhetorical exigency as "an imperfection marked by urgency . . . a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be" and that is capable of modification through discourse or action prompted by discourse (252-53). Bitzer offers air pollution as one of his examples of a "rhetorical exigency" because "its positive modification--reduction of pollution--strongly invites the assistance of discourse producing public awareness, indignation, and action of the right kind" (253). The exigency calls the rhetorical situation into existence, provides the audience with its character and motivation, and prescribes the rhetor s arguments, what Bitzer calls the rhetorical constraints. The exigency, he explains, "functions as the organizing principle" of the rhetorical situation: it "specifies the audience to be addressed and the change to be effected;" it "constrains the thought and action of the perceiver" or rhetor (253). Without exigencies, there would be no rhetorical discourse.

The rhetorical exigency is, then, the prime mover of rhetor, discourse, and audience, but Bitzer s concept requires an "exigency" of such objective and intrinsic power that its use as a theoretical construct or as a practical heuristic for most writing is severely compromised. The "crisis situations" that prompted Winston Churchill's "finest hours" (248), the Catiline Conspiracy (251), the assassination of President Kennedy (254-55), a divided America following the Civil War (256), the bombing of Pearl Harbor (257), the ousting of Khrushchev, China's testing of the atomic bomb (256): Bitzer's examples suggest the magnitude of the events that he has principally in mind when he speaks of rhetorical exigencies. Furthermore, he insist on the objectivity of exigencies: they are, he writes, "objective and publicly observable historic facts in the world we experience, are therefore, available for scrutiny by an observer or critic who attends to them," are "real or genuine"

(256-57). Bitzer's description of rhetorical exigencies suggests that he envisions a kind of rhetoric Richter scale to measure and validate exigencies in terms of the historic tremors they make. They are unmistakable and compelling and practically script a fitting response. But this understanding of the concept of rhetorical exigency, in addition to other limitations, makes its use in the classroom, where students are to write a series of papers on a schedule, in a short time, impractical. I suspect that this is no accident on Bitzer's part. He intends to exclude student writing generated to meet the requirements of a course from his category of "rhetorical discourse" because such writing does not respond to his understanding of compelling, historic, objective rhetorical exigencies but to artificial, contrived ones.

The definition of "rhetorical discourse" and the concept of the rhetorical exigency are too important to be restricted to the milestones in the history of oral address that Bitzer seems to have predominately in mind. Richard L. Larson, in a tactful critique of Bitzer, argues that the "category of 'rhetorical' discourse embraces much more of what an ordinary person says and writes than Professor Bitzer's article might at first suggest," pointing out that such mundane discourse as that routinely found in popular magazines and professional journals might be said to be responding to exigencies (166-67). While the concept of the "rhetorical exigency" could be defined to embrace the examples that Professor Larson points to, but I do not think that Bitzer's "rhetorical exigency" does. The concept needs to be reformulated.

My view of the rhetorical exigency begins by thinking of a claim that something is a "rhetorical exigency" as a status claim. The terms of Bitzer's definition, "a defect marked by urgency," suggest that not just any "defect" qualifies. This leads to the question of who confers this status. Bitzer's insistence on the "reality" of rhetorical exigencies and his placement of them "out there" suggests that he regards the "urgency" as not contingent, but in some sense intrinsic to certain phenomena. This emphasis has left him vulnerable to the charge that his view is naively objectivist or positivist. His critics, however, driven by the momentum of their opposition, often seem to hold the equally untenable position that rhetorical exigencies are the product solely of the subjective experience of the rhetor, who can confer the status "exigency" on something arbitrarily, merely by proclaiming it, as if such claims were performatives. Richard E. Vatz, for example, in "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation," argues that since the choice of what's important is made by the rhetor, meaning is "not discovered in situations but *created* by rhetors" (157); therefore, it is "not that 'exigence strongly invites utterance' [as Bitzer wrote] but utterance strongly invites exigence" (159). Is the exigence "out there" with the real readers and listeners or in the text, the creation of the omnipotent rhetor?

It makes more sense, however, to think of exigencies as contingent, a status conferred or not by what Robert L. Scott calls in another context, "validating audiences" (446). It seems to me that we should think of rhetorical exigencies in the way that the "new pragmatists" or "social constructionists" would have us look at all knowledge claims, as "constructs . . . generated by like-minded peers," as "community-generated and community maintained linguistic entities . . . that define or 'constitute' the communities that generate them . . . ," to quote Kenneth A. Bruffee's summary of this view (774). Looked at from the social constructionist perspective, rhetorical exigencies would not be thought of as compelling presences looming on the loch, nor as having their provenance in the ordaining power of rhetors. Rather, they somehow "belong" to interpretive communities or disciplines, although it makes equal sense to say that interpretive communities belong to rhetorical exigencies. Rhetorical exigencies are the motivating claims that convene an interpretive

community.

To illustrate how rhetorical exigencies belong to rhetorical communities, I will look again at Bitzer's essay, not, however, with an eye to what it says but to what it is, that is, as an example of academic discourse, on the assumption that we can learn much about academic discourse from an analysis of the exigencies that essays such as Bitzer's respond to and how they do so. Synthesizing Bitzer's practice with his argument yields a better understanding of the concept of the rhetorical exigency than does his doctrine taken alone.

What rhetorical exigencies does Bitzer's essay respond to? The only exigency explicitly invoked in the essay is a type familiar to the professoriate: "No major theorist," Bitzer writes, "has treated rhetorical situation thoroughly as a distinct subject in rhetorical theory; many ignore it" (248). The claim that one's work adds a brick to the developing wall of a discipline's knowledge is probably the most common exigency in all of academic discourse. But such conventional boasts, of course, do not necessarily command attention--are not, in themselves, genuine rhetorical exigencies. They merely appeal to the commonsense notion that all knowledge is cumulative and deserving of a hearing and allow the writer to get on with the story.

But the more important exigencies are those that evolve out of a writer's sense of why (to continue the metaphor) the wall is being built in the first place and where it is heading. In Bitzer's essay there are three such exigencies at least, and none is explicitly stated. The first concerns the ethos of the discipline of rhetoric. One "defect" that Bitzer's essay responds to is the lack of a satisfactory way to establish the moral status of rhetoric as a discipline. Are propaganda and advertisements rhetoric? Are they premier examples of rhetoric? Bitzer's theory provides a way to exclude them. In his essay, Bitzer makes a distinction between "spurious" and "sophistical" exigencies on the one hand, and genuine ones (257) on the other. As I understand his theory, an advertisement (for example) that (let us say) exhorted us to purchase a particular toothpaste in order to improve our moribund social life would, on the authority of Bitzer's theory, not qualify as "rhetorical discourse" no matter how accomplished its use of traditional rhetorical techniques because it is a response to a spurious, contrived exigency, one imputed solely for the purpose of selling toothpaste. Thus, Bitzer's essay provides a way to distinguish "mere" from "genuine" rhetoric, an exigency for rhetorical theory at least since Plato.

Bitzer's essay also addresses a second exigency experienced by rhetoricians in speech communication, the need to establish a perspective for rhetorical criticism as distinct from other types of criticism, most notably from literary criticism. By directing rhetorical critics to examine the discourse, not in itself, but with reference to the exigency that prompted and shaped it, Bitzer locates a vantage point that rhetorical critics can claim as their own. His theory thus contributes to "remedying" this second exigency.

Finally, it is, I think, Bitzer's awkward and unsuccessful effort to respond to a third exigency that has lead others to misunderstand the intentions of the essay. The style of th introduction to "The Rhetorical Situation" suggest that Bitzer is determined to give the impression that he is investigating the "rhetorical situation" in itself, unbiased by any other prior intentions (of the sort I have suggested, e.g. to establish a moral basis for rhetoric as a discipline) that might prejudice his analysis. Why this adoption of a pseudo-scientific stance? As a response to yet another exigency, this one experienced by those in the humanities generally, to establish the discipline on valid and, therefore, "scientific" grounds.

It is, I submit, significant for our understanding of the rhetorical exigency that Bitzer's essay acknowledges only the conventional and unimportant one--that no existing theory makes the rhetorical situation the center of its concern--and that none of the exigencies that presumably have made Bitzer's essay of such intense interest to those in speech communication is mentioned. The failure of the essay to invoke specifically these exigencies is indicative of the inadequacy of both Bitzer's objectivist formulation of the concept of the rhetorical exigency and his critics' subjectivist view. How can one think of "rhetorical exigencies" as the bullying presences, publicly available for our scrutiny, as Bitzer's essay depicts them, when, in this case, the essay itself does not mention them? On the other hand, because Bitzer does not mention explicitly the exigencies that animate his theory, it makes even less sense to maintain that "rhetorical exigencies" are proclaimed as such by rhetors. Rhetorical exigencies belong neither to "reality" nor to "rhetors," but to interpretive communities, which might be said not so much to "own" them as to "be" them. Thus, in the context of academic discourse at least (and perhaps more generally), rhetorical exigencies can be defined as the recurring and unresolved (perhaps unresolvable) concerns of an interpretive or rhetorical community that motivate its members study and discourse.

This view of the rhetorical exigency has implications for the teaching of composition--both for courses taught in the context of a particular discipline and for freshman composition.

If an interpretive community is defined in terms of the recurring concerns that convene it, then cataloguing the rhetorical exigencies implied or stated in the discourse of a discipline is a way to come to membership in the communities that make up a discipline. Something like a commonplace book of such exigencies would reveal the justification for a discipline's work and a sense of what counts as a contribution. For example, consider the the emboldened sentences in the following introductions, both from journals written for home economists interested in design:

> 1. **Recently, one of our acoustical consulting staff members was called in by a large banking organization regarding absenteeism, complaints of headaches, high percentage of employee error in a large area fully occupied by Key-Punch machines.** The manager of this section . . . determined that the major cause of the problem was excessive noise. . . . A . . . member of our staff made a careful analysis of the Key-Punch Room. . . . Our staff's recommendation was to carpet the entire area . . . . Several weeks later, our banking client called and stated that the results were astounding. Noise levels were noticeably lower, absenteeism and other complaints substantially reduced. Strangely enough, while carpeting has been in use for many years, the use of carpeting to solve a noise problem might have been unsuccessful as little as ten years ago. **It has only been during the last few years that commercial carpeting with high sound absorption and noise control properties has become available.** (Kodaras, *Interiors*)

> 2. There are certain factors in the household environment that exert both psychological and physiological influences on family members. One such factor is noise. **While family members may become so accustomed to frequent sounds in the home that they exhibit no conscious concern with respect to noise pollution, the meager empirical evidence available**

> **suggests that individuals are affected significantly by noise despite the fact that they may not be conscious of or overtly bothered by such . . . . Although most studies relating noise to high blood pressure and deafness have focused upon persons working in industrial settings, Farr asserted in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, that homemakers stand to suffer similar consequences.** (Coulter and Wolfe, *Housing Educators Journal*)

In the article from *Interiors*, a trade journal read by interior designers and professors of interior design, three important exigencies are suggestive of the character of the readership of the journal. The first exigency is the *loss of profit* that results from noisy environments; the second, which might be said to inform the whole journal, is the implied *neglect of the practical* (out of preference for the aesthetic) of those in interior design; the third, the implied *ignorance of readers* about innovations in carpeting that can minimize noise. Compare these exigencies with those invoked in the introduction to the article from the *Housing Educators Journal*, a journal read by professors in housing and interior design. It includes two exigencies: the general *need to eliminate stress in the home* and the *putative neglect* of problems in the home by researchers who direct their attention to problems in institutional settings. These exigencies suggest the place that design can play in promoting different values--profits and efficiency in the case of the community invoked in the *Interiors* article, health and harmony in the case of the *Housing Educators Journal*. Such an analysis of a discipline's discourse, especially if done less superficially and by those directly involved, can serve as a powerful heuristic that can help students arrive at motives for writing. Such an analysis would provide a model of how to approach readers--in the case of the article from *Interiors*, as in need of an occasional prod in the direction of the practical; in the case of the *Housing Educators Journal*, as fellow defenders of an environment neglected by researchers--the home. On the local rhetorical level, the invoked exigency dictates the general warrant that the arguments that follow must serve and is the basis for the writer's claim for the significance of the conclusions.

The application of the point of view advanced in this paper to freshman composition is much more problematic. The eternal problem of freshman composition is the lack of a context, the lack of genuine rhetorical situations, that might serve as a means of invention and a basis for rhetorical choice. Despite the undeniable benefits that have come from the emphasis on revision, the movement to make the writing process the subject matter of the freshman writing class, taught as an end in itself, has been a step away from the realization of genuine rhetoric courses. Even in the "old freshman comp" there was more of a foundation on which to build a rhetoric course than there is in current versions that take as their subject the writing process as a generalized cognitive model. The old freshman composition saw its role as introducing students to the university--to the habits of mind cultivated (at least in theory) by a liberal education. Within this ideal are, if perhaps not full-fledged rhetorical situations, then at least institutional exigencies that are part of the university and that those in the university community continually address. One thinks of the "defect marked by urgency" in Dr. Stockmann's remark in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* that "the majority is always wrong" as an idea that informs the ideal of a liberal education and is potentially generative of many specific exigencies that students might themselves discover. Or Emily Dickinson's remark on the Mona Lisa: "I don't see what all the fuss is about." Or Descartes' prelude to his "Cogito": "I thought . . . that I ought to reject as absolutely false all opinions in regard to which I could suppose the least

ground for doubt ...." The need for doubt--doubt about conventional wisdom, about the truth of stereotypes, about the basis for belief--which is certainly promoted throughout the curriculum, is one example of a type of a master exigency that could be part of a writing course intended to introduce students to membership in the university community. But in this version of freshman composition, we would have to do more than merely tell students about the community they were entering and more even than analyze it; above all esle, we would have to be that community.

The criticism of the traditional heuristic for the analysis of audience and the development of a theory that emphasizes the ability of the rhetor to create and not merely accommodate the reader has deepened our understanding of what it means to write for an audience. But our richer understanding has come at some practical cost. Exhorting students to "consider your audience" can be a powerful antidote to egocentric writing if the exhortation conjures up an image of a real reader looking bored, puzzled, or angry. This powerful image is lost when the audience is said to be graphic traces, verbal clues in the writer's own text. At least in helping students to write academic discourse, a shift in our focus from fictional, invoked audiences to the rhetorical exigencies that convene a disciplinary community would lower the level of abstraction, even if the esoteric language remained, which, of course, it need not. Robert G. Roth concludes in an article, which appears in the most recent *CCC*, "Helping students create their own audiences may mean replacing the question, 'Who are my readers and what do they need?' with one that encompasses the rhetorical situation in its entirety: 'On what basis do I claim my readers' attention?'" (55) In answering such a question, students would come in contact with rhetorical exigencies that could motivate and sustain their own academic discourse.

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Notes

[1] Bitzer's essay has been cited in over one-hundred articles in the journals of speech communication since the essay first appeared. It has also been the subject of a controversy, which can be sampled by reviewing he articles by Richard E. Vatz, Bitzer's most effective critic, and by Bitzer himself, which are listed in the "Sources Cited" list below. Also included there and of particular interest to writing teachers, are the article by Nevin K. Laib, which makes imaginative use of Bitzer's "exigency" in the development of the author's own theory of rhetoric, and the article by Richard L. Larson, which is discussed later in this paper.

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